

*THE FOSTER FELLOWS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE*

A REPORT ON THE PROGRAM'S FIRST YEAR

SUMMER 2011

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## Executive Summary

The Foster Fellows Program was established to fund faculty-student collaboration on a community-based research project titled *Promoting Environmental Justice in Oxnard, Ventura County: Integrating Science into Civic Engagement*, at California Lutheran University (CLU). The program aligns with the University's mission "to educate leaders for a global society who are strong in character and judgment, confident in their identity and vocation, and committed to service and justice." Specifically, it is a project that exemplifies "research in service of communities" with the objective of promoting social change and community well-being."

The purpose of the project is to develop a model of environmental justice in low-income communities by:

1) assessing exposure to pollution and 2) exploring the most effective avenues for community input and action.

The long-term impact is significant because CLU students will acquire the capacity to contribute to their communities in leadership roles throughout their lives, particularly for the betterment of underserved populations.

Two faculty members serve as the principal investigators and mentors for the project, Dr. Haco Hoang from Political Science and Dr. Grady Hanrahan from Chemistry. Four students were selected to serve as the first Foster Fellows in Summer 2011 – Antonia Flores (Chemistry), Maria Flores (Chemistry), Kaitlyn Noli (Global Studies) and Hayley Palmer (Political Science). Antonia, Maria and Kaitlyn are CLU Class of 2011 graduates. Hayley is a CLU Class of 2010 graduate.

## Background

The Foster Fellows program was made possible by a generous donation from the Gladycy Foster estate in Spring 2011 with the support of University Advancement, Academic Affairs, and the College of Arts and Sciences. The project brings the University into the community, encourages CLU students to collaborate with faculty on research, and applies research in service of the Oxnard community in Ventura County.

The Foster program is distinctive because it is a field-research based, interdisciplinary endeavor that positions CLU as a resource for the community. By fusing the insights of the physical and social sciences, the researchers – faculty and students – produce and apply their project results to address an important social problem, and encourage community activism that is informed by sound scientific principles and findings. Through their involvement in rigorous and intensive research, students develop the skills, knowledge and opportunities to be agents of social change.

After its first summer, the Foster program has achieved its initial goals of fostering research collaboration between faculty and students, and exposing students to meaningful ways to apply their academic skills in service of the community.

## Accomplishments and Status of Project

- Students were trained in rigorous quantitative methodology including laboratory/experimentation techniques related to water, soil and urine sampling, monitoring, and testing.
- Students were trained in rigorous qualitative methodology including survey design, coding and data analysis.
- Completion of the data collection and preliminary findings for the first phase of assessing public perceptions of civic engagement and environmental risk/exposure in Oxnard. The second phase begins in Summer 2012.



Foster research team.

- Preliminary collection and analysis of water, soil and urine samples from affected populations in Oxnard.
- Development of a public outreach plan to inform community members and decision makers about the project and solicit their feedback throughout the process.
- Publicity for the project in relevant community-based venues including Oxnard Community College fair, Mixteco Festival and Oxnard flea market.
- Invitations to present preliminary project findings at the International Making Cities Livable Conference in January 2012 (Vancouver, Canada) and International Conference on Environmental, Economic, Cultural and Social Sustainability in May 2012 (Portland, Oregon).

During the 2011-12 academic year, two to four students will be identified and selected to be Foster Fellows for Summer 2012. After their selection, the students will be mentored by Dr. Hanrahan and Dr. Hoang during the school year before the fellowship period begins so that they are ready to be active researchers in the community starting in the summer. Student researchers are funded for 8-12 weeks during the summer.

### **Funding Uses**

Foster funds were expended to student and faculty researchers to offset travel, meals and other costs associated with their research expenses. All expenditures were in line with the original funded proposal and were well within the budget as proposed. Starting in the 2011-2012 academic year, the faculty directors will receive teaching credits (as in-kind support from CLU) to mentor the selected Foster fellows for the upcoming summer and to continue the research project beyond the summer. Continuing the project throughout the entire calendar year is important because it allows the researchers to build social networks with grassroots organizations, foster the trust of the community and decision makers, collect and monitor pollution levels year-round, and maintain the momentum of the project.

### **Expanding the Initial Foster Project**

The Foster program provides three years of seed money for the project to allow the faculty researchers to seek external funding. Based on the Foster project's preliminary findings, the California Wellness Foundation awarded Drs. Hanrahan and Hoang a two-year, \$150,000 grant starting October 2011 through October 2013, with the possibility of a one year renewal. The Foster program was instrumental to the success of the Wellness grant because it demonstrated the University's commitment to the project and the faculty investigators. Furthermore, it enabled the researchers to produce preliminary findings that made the project more competitive for external funding.

The Wellness grant will fund a more comprehensive sampling and testing of pollution exposure as well as a more rigorous assessment of Oxnard's civic capacity including in-depth interviews and focus groups among the affected populations. It may also allow the research team to extend the duration of the project for additional years.

### **Future Goals**

Dr. Hoang and Dr. Hanrahan will continue to shepherd and meet the research goals and expectations of the project including the selection, training and mentoring of the Foster Fellows. Through continued interactions with and reflections from students, Drs. Hoang and Hanrahan will monitor the educational, career and volunteer paths of Foster Fellows to determine how their academic and personal experiences were enhanced by doing community-based, interdisciplinary research. Most importantly, the faculty researchers will assess whether the project fostered the spirit of leadership and public service that it was intended to instill in the Foster Fellows. Will these students become change agents as they advocate for environmental justice in affected communities? The faculty mentors are optimistic that this will be the case for the majority of the Foster Fellows.

As the researchers continue to collect and analyze their data, they plan to regularly present their findings and the status of the project to the community and in professional venues such as academic conferences. They will also work with Public Relations to publicize their work in various media outlets.

## Conclusions

In its first summer, the Foster Fellows has been a very successful example of “research in service of communities” by fostering:

- 1) faculty–student collaboration on a project that is truly interdisciplinary by fusing the insights of the physical and social sciences
- 2) meaningful experiences for students in rigorous and intensive community–based research in Oxnard
- 3) project findings that will directly benefit and serve the needs of a marginalized community disproportionately impacted by environmental pollution.

## In Their Own Words: Reflections from Foster Fellows

All of the CLU students involved in the project live in Ventura County, and had a personal interest in using their academic skills to promote social change and community well-being. Two of the students are first-generation college students from Oxnard whose father has worked in the local agricultural industry for more than 20 years. All four of the students started graduate school in Fall 2011, and gained invaluable research experience that will serve them well in their future studies and career paths. The reflections excerpted below illustrate how the Foster Fellows program has a profound impact on the personal and professional development of CLU students.

“The Foster project was very dear to me because it allowed me to work on both environmental issues and civic engagement because of my father. He has been working for over twenty years at the strawberry fields, and it kills me knowing that he is being exposed to all of these dangerous chemicals and he has no clue what he is being exposed to. I believe it is time that we future scholars apply what we learned from education and help uneducated farm workers and low income families and educate them of their rights and hazardous chemicals being used in the agriculture industry.”

---Maria Flores, Chemistry major from CLU Class of 2011

“Interacting with the Oxnard population gave me invaluable experience in the field and in using new research methods such as canvassing...This project has also shaped my academic goals. As a graduate student in the Global Studies program at UCSB I plan to continue to research environmental justice issues and how (minority and immigrant) communities in particular are disproportionately affected by environmental hazards...In the long run I hope to pursue a career in advocacy and to work for a non-profit organization which advocates for marginalized groups locally and globally.”

---Kaitlyn Noli, Global Studies major from CLU class of 2011.

